

.chapter six.

SUFFERING AND DEATH TRANSFORMED



Even in the best of marriages the blessings are mixed with disappointments, the joys are laced with sufferings, new life is accompanied with a variety of dyings. Our belief is that Jesus Christ, who shared to the fullest our sufferings and death, has given radically new meaning to both, not only for himself but also for all of us. We examine here the tribulations and triumphs of marriage in light of Jesus' victory over pain and death.

THE JESUS EXPERIENCE

We tend to limit the sufferings of Jesus to Holy Thursday night and Good Friday. The Gospel narratives, however, record a series of sorrows, rejections and disappointments throughout his public ministry for which Calvary was but the culmination.

Early in his ministry Jesus returned to Nazareth, went to the synagogue, read an Isaian text and then spoke to those gathered. After they heard his message "all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of

the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way" (Luke 4:28–29).

Jesus lost his beloved cousin John the Baptist to a cruel and violent death. Herod had John arrested, chained, imprisoned and beheaded. When Jesus received this news he withdrew with some of his disciples to a place where they could be by themselves (Matthew 14:3–13).

Jesus was the object of many serious charges. One of the most damning was the accusation that he was possessed by Beelzebul, the prince of devils (Mark 3:22). On two occasions the negative reaction to Jesus' teaching was so strong that his hearers took up stones to throw at him (John 8:59, 10:31).

It was not just with his enemies that Jesus had problems. He knew misunderstanding and rejection from those who had been close to him. Some of his own relatives tried to have him put away. After his "Bread of Life" discourse in John's Gospel "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him" (John 6:66). He was betrayed with a kiss by Judas, who then committed suicide. He was denied three times by Peter.

As his ministry progressed, Jesus had to face the prospect of his own death. But his was no ordinary dying. He was arrested, falsely charged and condemned to execution. He was mocked, scourged and crowned with thorns. He was crucified as a criminal, and rejected by the highest authorities of his own cherished religion.

By accepting rejection, suffering and death with forgiveness and love he conquered the sinful hatred that had condemned him.

He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so

that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls. (1 Peter 2:22–25)

By rising from the dead he has forever transformed the meaning of death.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:20–23)

Out of the depths of his profound suffering and death, Jesus has been raised to new life, and has promised the same for us. We now explore the implications that Jesus' death and resurrection have for the marital journey.

MARRIAGE: THE CHALLENGE AND THE HOPE
 Christian spirituality is centered on the crucified and risen Christ. Both aspects need to be kept together. It is significant that after the resurrection when Jesus appeared to his disciples, they saw him in his risen glory *with his wounds* (John 20:24–28). This is a wonderful image for Christian couples to keep in the forefront of their contemplative minds. It is precisely through his acceptance of suffering, rather than abandoning his mission and compromising his personal integrity, that Jesus is glorified. His wounds can never be eclipsed, but they are forever gloriously transformed.

In his own glorified state Christ transforms his followers. In his post-Resurrection appearances he shared his Spirit and brought radical change to his disciples. From misunderstanding him during his public ministry, they came to new perceptions. From abandoning

him on that Thursday night, they followed him even to their own death. Peter, the triple denier became the triple proclaimer of his love for Christ (John 21:15–17). Thomas the disbeliever was confirmed in his faith. Paul, who did not know Jesus during his public ministry, was forever changed through his encounter with the Risen Christ. From being a persecutor of Christians he became an apostle to the Gentiles. Finally, through their death in fidelity to Christ they share forever in his risen glory.

So it is with us. The crucified and Risen Christ is with us transforming our marital journey. There are the normal range of hardships, hurts and pain that go with any marriage. We must make a living, do multiple tasks and manage the countless minutiae that are embedded in everyday married life. Despite our best efforts there are occasional unavoidable misunderstandings. Our intimate love does not insulate us from unintentional hurts. We experience disappointments, loss of jobs, various injuries and illnesses, old age and ultimately death itself.

There are changes in each of us and in our relationship as we move down the lifelong road of our marriage. We grow from post-honeymooners through the first several critical years, which for most include the advent of children. We move through the middle years and maybe “a midlife crisis,” whatever form that might take. At some point we gradually go from a full household to an empty nest. For not a few that nest may not remain empty for too long, depending on what difficulties may confront our adult daughters and sons. Parenting never ends. We then move on together through the middle years into senior citizenship, perhaps retirement and then into old age.

This is the picture, if we are lucky. But there are millions who have not been so fortunate. Instead of these transitions bringing the couple closer together, many have been driven apart. The high divorce rate attests to this sad reality. The lives of so many others are marked with unexpected challenges and heartbreaking tragedies:

chronic unemployment, children with birth defects, death of a child, marital infidelities, abuse and the early death of a beloved spouse. Many of these wounds will never completely heal.

But whatever our journey, be it one marked with the normal range of problems, or one marred by tragedy, Christian faith provides us with the awareness that the crucified and Risen Christ is with us, at the door knocking. Do we allow him in?

Neither the normal wear and tear of the journey nor the scars of the tragic wounds can be prevented. But they can be transformed. It is all in how we respond.

Hanging in my office is an attractive card with a quote attributed to Paul Claudel. It reads: "Jesus did not come to explain away suffering or remove it. He came to fill it with his presence." When confronted with sorrows, small or large, we are tempted to ask, "Why did God will this?" Or, "Why did God allow it?" These may be the wrong questions, for all the speculation in the world can never provide a satisfactory answer this side of the grave. The better question is: What is the will of God for me now in light of this particular set of circumstances, regardless of how the situation came about? How, in other words, can I respond to these realities in my life in ways that keep intact my personal integrity rather than compromise it? How can we as a couple grow in faith and love with God and each other as we respond to the ordinary and extraordinary trials and tribulations?

Two thoughts are relevant here.

1. *It is helpful to situate the tough and sad times, the disappointments and even the tragedies in the context of our past personal experience of God's love and care for us.* Too often we tend to isolate the bad times from the good and wind up seeing God in negative ways. The author of Psalm 22 provides a more positive approach. He is a person seriously ill and oppressed by his enemies. His prayer begins, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" The psalmist then addresses his own question. He places his present trials in the context of the history of his ancestors.

Yet you are holy,
 enthroned on the praises of Israel.
In you our ancestors trusted;
 they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried, and were saved;
 in you they trusted, and were not put to shame. (vv. 3–5)

The psalmist then reflects on his own personal history.

Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
 you kept me safe on my mother's breast.
On you I was cast from my birth,
 and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
Do not be far from me,
 for trouble is near
 and there is no one to help. (vv. 9–11)

As subsequent verses make clear, these remembrances do not magically take away his problems. They do, however, help him turn to God with faith and trust. The concluding theme of the psalm is one of praise and a sense of fulfilled hope.

I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
 in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
You who fear the LORD, praise him!
 All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
 stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
For he did not despise or abhor
 the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
 but heard when I cried to him. (vv. 22–24)

It is significant that the New Testament records Jesus praying the beginning of this psalm as he died on the cross (Matthew 27:46). As a devout Jew, Jesus undoubtedly knew well this entire psalm.

A prayer shared with me some years ago reflects this same insight of seeing the difficult times in light of the good.

Lord, as this day unfolds, help us to see the creations of beauty you have bestowed upon us. It can be easy for us to let ourselves be overwhelmed with sorrow because of the hard times we may face, and consequently much of the good that surrounds us is overlooked. Please Lord, help us to keep our minds open to see the good things in life so that we may focus on the rainbow, not the storm; that we may see the rose, not the thorns. And when night falls, may it be not the blackness that overwhelms us, but the beauty of the majestic stars. For, when we focus on the goodness and love that exists, we can fully appreciate the wonderful gift of life you have blessed us with, and when we concentrate on the love that is present, we radiate love and celebrate your love for us.¹

Recalling the blessings in our life not only helps us cope with present sorrows, it makes us less fearful of the future. Our experience of God being with us during the past dark periods of our life gives us hope that God will never abandon us and will be with us, whatever lonely roads and dark nights might mark our future journey. A saying attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson comes to mind: “For all I have seen, I trust the Creator for all I have not seen.”

2. *As a Christian couple our prayer in time of sorrow can be deeply comforting by keeping in mind the image of the crucified and Risen Christ.* He is God’s Son, but this did not make him immune from profound suffering. It is not that God directly willed the suffering. What God willed was that Jesus proclaim the kingdom of God, even though it was inevitable that humans would reject him and put him to death. But God was there with him on the cross giving him the strength to endure human-inflicted sufferings with his personal integrity intact. And God raised him up from the seeming final destruction of Good Friday into the glory of risen life on Easter Sunday.

It is thus with us as we travel our earthly pilgrimage. God does not “send” us difficulties and trials. They are built into the marital journey. But our Christian faith enables us to be aware that God and Christ are with us in our darkest hours, giving us the strength to work through our sufferings, empowering us to preserve our personal integrity, and raising us from the ashes of our dyings into new life now and for eternity.

Concluding Prayer

We turn to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
our crucified and risen Savior.

We give you praise and thanks
for passing through death into new life.
You give us hope for the journey,
whatever may lie ahead.

Be with us, we pray,
that through all the dyings
we may grow in new life,
until that day when we are forever
united with you in your risen glory.
We pray, this, Lord, in your name. Amen.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What was one of the most difficult and trying events in your married life thus far?
2. How did you experience the presence of God and of Christ leading you to new life through that dark hour?
3. What possible sad event in your future journey do you dread the most? How does your past experience of new life through suffering give you hope to endure what comes?